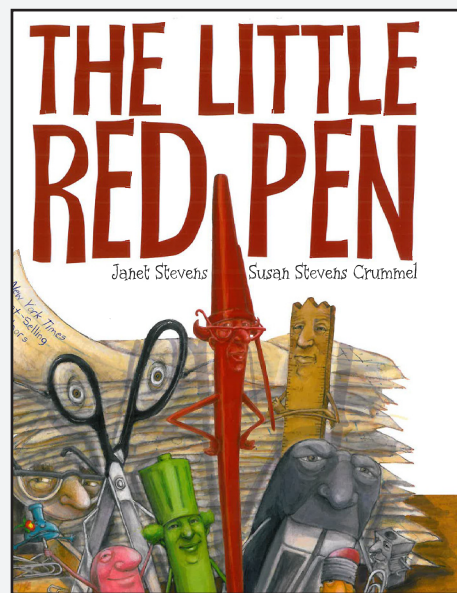


## Second Reaction: Choosing Picture Books to Share and to Foster Aesthetic Responses from Both Adults and Children of All Ages

Stevens, Janet, and Susan Stevens Crummel. *The Little Red Pen*. Illus. Janet Stevens. New York: Harcourt Children's Books, 2011.

*Ann Koci*



*The Little Red Pen*, a picture book by Janet Stevens and Susan Stevens Crummel, is a great example of how a children's book can appeal to everyone who reads it. From the cover, whose illustration features all the characters, we notice right away that they are all items a teacher would have in her desk—from a very large grumpy stapler to an excitable little pushpin. The Little Red Pen in the middle of the line-up is in charge, just as any teacher in a classroom would be. Lily, my seven-year-old granddaughter, told me she noticed before we even began reading that *The Little Red Pen* was the teacher, because the pen was the tallest.

The authors, one of whom is also the illustrator, used their experience as teachers to tell a story about *The Little Red Pen*, who can't get all her papers graded and would like some help from her desk mates. All of the characters in this story have been drawn with human features and personified in all matter of speech and action matching what a reader would come to expect from each particular piece of equipment. For example,

Mr. Stapler can't work because everybody keeps pounding on his back, and it hurts. The authors have also included many puns, such as when Scissors says, "I hate to be blunt." Chincheta, the little Spanish-speaking pushpin, exclaims, "El pozo de no retorno!" when referring to the waste basket, also known as the Pit.

There are also allusions to childhood stories with heroes such as the The Little Red Hen who ended up doing everything herself, and Chicken Little who worried when she thought the sky was falling. However, we are warned in this story by The Little Red Pen that it might be the end of the world if those papers don't get graded—and she needs help.

The pages of this picture book are filled with detailed illustrations not only to notice but also to spend time enjoying. When I shared the book with my seven-year-old and my eleven-year-old granddaughters, they agreed that they liked Pushpin the most because she spoke Spanish and called herself Senorita Chincheta. They also noticed that each character's speech was represented both by a different ink color and a different font. For instance, Green Highlighter's speech appeared in bright green. Poor Eraser spoke in pink and was very concerned about his head shrinking because of being rubbed off. He was forgetting everything because his head was becoming smaller.

Because the Little Red Pen works into the night and falls asleep, she rolls off the desk and into the Pit, which was a waste basket. When that happened all the desk characters had to figure a way to get her out, and it took all of them, working together, to come up with a plan which would work. Lily, who is seven, said her favorite part was when Chincheta, who was the smallest, said she could wake up Tankzilla, the hamster, so he would turn the wheel in his cage, which in turn would pull The Little Red Pen up and out of the Pit. Of course, this would only work because of our paper clip friends who had formed a chain. They also pulled up Mr. Felt-Tip Marker who had been missing for weeks because his top had been lost, he had dried up, and had been thrown away.

At the end of the story all of the characters pitched in to grade all those papers, and the "world was safe." Also, at the end of the story, both girls wanted to read it again and so Zoe, who is eleven, read it to her sister, Lily. When it was time for them to go home, Lily wanted to take the book with her so she could "read" it herself. She said she would be able to because each character talked in a different color.

We also used this book in EDCI 311, a children's multicultural literature class at Purdue University. One student told me that she read it to a third-grade student whom she teaches through another class at Purdue. The child's teacher heard about it and wanted to read it to the entire class. Another Purdue student of mine has children of her own. One of her daughters took it to school where, again, it was taken over by the teacher in the classroom.

The cleverness, format, characterization, and storyline all contribute to this book's favorable responses. One thing I was aware of as I read the book was how much fun these sisters must have had writing it. For me, I can never look at a stapler in the same way again.

## About the Author

**Ann Koci** has taught self-contained classrooms in Tippecanoe County and fifth and sixth grade language arts in Houston, Texas. She is presently a lecturer in the School of Education, Curriculum and Instruction at Purdue University.